

## **Communications Tips & Techniques Series**

### **How to Deliver Effective Speeches**

Most of us fear speaking in public more than anything else. We often get a weak, queasy feeling, often accompanied by shaking, sweating, or a pounding heart. Excessive nervous energy causes these feelings. But your nervous energy can help give vitality to spark your presentation. Without it, your speech would be flat, dull, and lifeless. The key is to take your nervous energy and control and channel it.

**Be Prepared:** Being prepared will help remove your fear. The more prepared you are, the more confident and less nervous you will feel. Try to breathe deeply and exhale fully between breaths. Try to consciously slow down your breathing rate. When you are introduced, walk briskly to the podium. Take a step toward the listeners on one side of the room as you talk to them.

**Your Appearance:** How you appear will either enhance or negate your message. Project earnestness, sincerity, and enthusiasm. Try to be well rested before a speech. Rehearse the night before, but get a good night's sleep. You'll come across better and will be less prone to make mistakes.

Your clothing should not be so casual or so bold that people focus on it instead of your message. Wear an outfit that makes you feel confident and comfortable. If possible, check yourself in a full-length mirror before you start.

Stand straight but not rigid. Balance your weight on both feet, and hold your stomach in—it'll improve your posture. Avoid nervous body movements, even if you feel uncomfortable. Vary your stance occasionally, but don't fidget. Unnecessary or annoying activity detracts from your message. Keep your hands away from your face and out of your pockets.

**Look Them in the Eye:** Eye contact with your audience is a powerful tool to connect with them. Try to include everyone in the audience equally when you look out over the crowd. Good eye contact increases your credibility as a speaker.

**Smile, Smile, Smile:** Remember to smile—convey a sense of comfort, relaxation, and confidence. Even if you don't feel that way initially, it'll get easier with experience.

**Body Language:** Gestures should appear to be a natural extension of your voice, neither contrived nor artificial. Avoid a white knuckle grip on the podium—relax your hands and it's

easier to relax the rest of you.

Move smoothly, not abruptly—the way you would do in a conversation with a friend. And vary your stance occasionally. If you're not using a stationary microphone, you have more freedom to walk about and create some visual variety for your audience.

**Notes:** It's fine to have notes to speak from—but don't let your notes be a distraction. It's usually apparent from your tone of voice and your appearance when you are reading from a script. But no one objects to a few index cards in your hand with the main points you want to remember to make.

**Visuals:** Visual props—a book, poster, exhibit, video, photos, or overhead transparencies/slides—can enhance your speech. They can help reinforce your points, but choose them carefully. They should be visible to everyone in the audience, and you should be able to handle them smoothly with no fumbling. Remember to keep your mouth near the microphone when you're talking about your props. Pre-test any equipment to be sure that it works—and that you know how to run it.

Check your visuals for accuracy and readability from a distance equal to the last chair in the room. Faulty visuals—or good visuals poorly displayed—are worse than none at all.

**Overheads:** With overheads/slides, the rule is less is more. The best and most effective overheads are short and to the point. You'll lose your audience if they're busy trying to figure out poor overheads.

The type should be of a size and font that is easy to read. Check the readability of your overheads from the back of the room to make sure everyone can see them easily. If the audience is older, they'll be less able to read the print. Also, be sure to leave the overheads up long enough for the audience to read them. Make sure your position is not blocking anyone's view.

Tips for Overheads/Slides	
•	<b><i>Think about your audience.</i></b> Slides/overheads should highlight important points, not duplicate your entire presentation. Slides or overheads are meant to support your talk, not overpower it. Never read to the audience from the slides. It's okay to pause and let them read it themselves.
	<b><i>Think about composition.</i></b> Aim for a visual balance between all the text and graphic components. Don't crowd your information too close to the edges. Leave space between lines of type to ensure legibility.

- ***Be consistent.*** Make the colors and styles of elements the same on all overheads or slides. Put all titles and subtitles in the same location, same color, and same type face.

**Your Voice:** A good speaking voice is essential for delivering an effective speech. Your voice should be pleasant, conveying a sense of warmth. It should be natural, reflecting your true personality and sincerity. It should be dynamic, giving the impression of force and strength, even when it isn't especially loud. Here are some ways, other than increasing volume, to give the impression of force or strength:

- Pitching your voice higher or lower.
- Using emphatic gestures.
- Reducing or increasing your rate of speech.
- Pausing for effect.

Your voice should be expressive—portraying subtle shades of meaning and never sounding monotonous or without proper emotion. It should be easily heard—with proper volume and clear articulation. Be sure you can be heard clearly. Pause to let brief interruptions (such as an airplane going over or a waiter dropping a tray) subside. Also pause when your audience is moved to laugh or applaud—you don't want them to miss anything. When you are making a natural transition in your speech, pause to let your words have a chance to soak in.

**Vocal Variety:** Vary your voice for a successful speech. Be sure to vary:

- Your rate (speed up or slow down to make a point).
- Your pitch (work within a comfortable range, but not all on the same level).
- Your tone (match your tone to your message—humorous, serious, inspiring, or comforting).
- Your volume (but don't under- or over-power the microphone).

Project your voice to the farthest person in your audience. Watch the audience to determine if they are receptive or if they are straining to hear.

Don't over-memorize or over-rehearse your speech so much that you sound like you're doing it on automatic pilot. You want to sound confident, but also fresh. Attempt to sound conversational, certainly not pedantic or strident.

**Effective Pauses:** Even though many speakers are afraid of them, effectively used pauses attract listener attention. Pause when you want a point to in the minds of the audience before you go to the next point. Brief pauses are also effective when you're building to a climax with your message. Pause as a sign of transition—this tells your audience that you intend to shift to a new point.

**Articulate:** Pay attention to your articulation. Don't mumble or slur your words together. Avoid lazy utterances, like *gonna* for *going to*, or *wanna* for *want to*. Some people rehearse with a tape recorder—and then listen to themselves to find ways to improve their articulation.

**Avoid Fillers:** Avoid audible fillers (especially *uh*)—short, silent pauses are much better. Using *uh* between thoughts is, unfortunately, a common problem, even among experienced speakers. Listen for it on your speech tapes, or ask a friend or family member to listen to you rehearse and tell you if you're using audible fillers that are distracting. Practice silent pauses so your *uhs* will be silent. Train your mind to set off a little warning bell whenever you say *uh* and then work to eliminate this annoying habit from your speech.

**Keep Your Head Up:** It is harder for your audience to hear you when you're looking down at your notes or facing your visuals or props instead of the audience. Keep your head up and face your audience as much as possible.

**Applause:** Finally, wait for and acknowledge applause (if it's appropriate to the occasion) with a smile or nod. But don't leave the podium unattended—if you're introducing another speaker, or if there's a master of ceremonies or host, wait for that person to come back to the podium before you step aside.

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